

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 20 May 2022 7.30pm

Sergei Babayan piano

CLASSIC *f*M Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

- Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin BWV1004 (1720)
transcribed by Ferruccio Busoni
- Franz Liszt** (1811-1886) Der Müller und der Bach from *Müllerlieder von Franz Schubert* S565 (1846)
From *12 Lieder von Schubert* S558 (1837-8)
Gretchen am Spinnrade • Ständchen • Auf dem Wasser zu singen
Aufenthalt from *Schwanengesang* S560 (1838-9)
- Sergey Rachmaninov** (1873-1943) Etude-tableau in E flat minor Op. 39 No. 5 (1916-7)
Etude-tableau in C minor Op. 39 No. 1 (1916-7)
Moment musical in E flat minor Op. 16 No. 2 (1896)
- Interval*
- Franz Liszt** Ballade No. 2 S171 (1853)
- Robert Schumann** (1810-1856) Kreisleriana Op. 16 (1838)
*Äusserst bewegt • Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch • Sehr aufgeregt •
Sehr langsam • Sehr lebhaft • Sehr langsam • Sehr rasch •
Schnell und spielend*
- Andrius Žlabys** (b.1977) Echoes of light (2019) *European première*

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Bach's Second Partita for solo violin seems at first the most modest of the whole set of sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin – the *Gigue* comes to its conclusion after about a quarter of an hour. Bach's first audiences, doubtless unprovided with printed programmes, had no way of knowing they were only half-way through, and their wonder must have grown and grown as the magnificent *Chaconne* unwound itself majestically. The medical missionary and Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer thought that 'out of a single theme Bach conjures a whole world'. World enough, and time, for composers and audiences ever since to take the mighty ending on its own, and on its own terms. Both Mendelssohn and Schumann wrote piano accompaniments to Bach's violin part, which must have eased the path for many an over-tasked fiddler. Brahms arranged the actual violin part to be played on the piano, thoughtfully limiting himself to the left hand alone, in order to match the 'limitations' of an unaccompanied violin. He told Clara Schumann that it was 'one of the most wonderful and incomprehensible pieces of music'. The pianist Ernst Pauer and the composer Joachim Raff both arranged the Chaconne at about the same time as Brahms, but for two-handed piano. Raff's additions are comparatively modest: Pauer makes the mistake of adding busy counterpoints from the very beginning, destroying Bach's careful build-up of activity. It's particularly interesting, in these arrangements and the many, many others, to see how the possibility of filling in the chords comes to grief where Bach has cleverly used his very limitations to imply a harmony that cannot be pinned down to actual notes. My favourite spot for this is the falling, sighing figures just after the first set of upward-rushing scales. But such amplifications are at least partly justified by Agricola, Bach's student from 1738 till 1741, who reports that Bach 'often played [the solo violin pieces] on the clavichord, adding as much in the nature of harmony as he found necessary'. I suspect, though, that Bach left the ambiguous bits ambiguous, even at the keyboard! By general consent, **Busoni's** piano version of the 1890s is the classic, though it's sometimes played as amplified by Alexander Siloti, which makes it even harder.

In March 1838, sipping a coffee in the Piazza San Marco, **Liszt** glanced over someone's shoulder to read the headlines of their German newspaper, to discover that Budapest had suffered a catastrophic flood. He immediately set off from Venice, arriving after a few weeks in Vienna, where he had studied with Czerny. He quickly arranged charity concerts to raise money for the flood victims further down the Danube. (He had not returned to his native Hungary for 15 years, and this was the event that suddenly made him feel Hungarian.) His concerts included performances of **Schubert** songs in which he accompanied Randhartinger, the Director of the Court Opera. His appetite thus whetted, he proceeded to transcribe Schubert songs for solo piano, including them in his charity concerts too. Diabelli published some of them, and his rival, Haslinger, followed suit, commissioning more and

more until Liszt complained: 'Haslinger overwhelms me with Schubert. I have just sent him 24 more new songs, and for the moment I am rather tired of this work'.

Liszt was always careful to include the words in his transcriptions. 'The Miller and the Brook', from the song-cycle *The Fair Maid of the Mill*, is the dialogue the young man sings with the brook just before drowning himself for love. 'Gretchen at the Spinning-wheel', Schubert's first transcendent masterpiece, written at the age of 18, is sung by Faust's unfortunate lady-love as she remembers his kiss. The hesitations and hurrying of the spinning-wheel, the index to Margaret's emotions, are graphically embodied in the music. The 'Serenade' is a setting of Shakespeare's 'Hark, hark! the lark', from *Cymbeline*. 'To be sung upon the waters' records an evening boat-trip, ending with an anticipation of boat-trips to come. 'Resting Place' is the song of an unhappy wanderer whose only resting-place is the roaring storm and the rushing river.

Rachmaninov composed his first set of *Etudes-tableaux* (Op. 36) in the summer of 1911. The second set, Op. 39, followed in 1916-7. Rachmaninov had been world-famous since his tour of the USA in 1910, in which he played his Third Piano Concerto with Mahler conducting. His new sort of study, frankly acknowledging a pictorial inspiration, though giving little information as to its precise nature, set the seal on his mastery of technique. His only substantial solo piano piece after Op. 39 was the *Variations on a Theme of Corelli*, in 1931. The six *Musical Moments* of 1896 revive various piano genres from earlier in the century. Number 2 is another dazzling study, and brings a pleasing symmetry of key to the selection.

Liszt's second *Ballade* dates from 1853. Like Rachmaninov (and like Chopin), Liszt, despite inventing the symphonic poem, was in this instance reticent about what the music might be 'about'.

The same accusation could never be levelled at **Schumann**, often reluctant to let even the simplest melody pass without a descriptive title. Of *Kreisleriana* he remarked that the title would mean nothing except to a German. Kreisler was the manic musical hero of the novels of ETA Hoffman, and this kaleidoscopic set of eight fantasies, composed in 1838, depicts some of the moods German readers knew so well. It also incorporates musical pictures of Clara, who became his wife two years later, but at this point was so frustratingly unattainable that Schumann even considered ending it all. Which almost takes us back to Schubert's Miller.

Pianist and composer **Andrius Žilabys**, born in Lithuania, studied in the US with tonight's soloist, who gave the world première of this piece in Michigan earlier this month. Commissioned by the Irving S Gilmore International Piano Festival, *Echoes of light* bears the subtitle 'Homage to Mozart'.